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ABSTRACT

In the belief that parents and teachers working together are the best means for assuring that children will become skillful writers, this document contains suggestions for parents that are designed to encourage a positive attitude toward writing in children. The first part of the document presents ten things to do at home, including giving children gifts associated with writing, sharing letters from friends and relatives with them, and encouraging them to write away for free gifts and information. The second part of the document presents ten things parents do in conjunction with school writing programs, including keeping an optimistic attitude toward early writing efforts and getting involved with teachers and administrators to give writing a high priority. (HTH)

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NCTE National Council of Teachers of English
1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801

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HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD BECOME A BETTER WRITER

Suggestions for Parents
from the National Council of Teachers of English

Dear Parent:

We're pleased you want to know how to help the NCTE effort to improve the writing of young people. Parents and teachers working together are the best means for assuring that children and youth will become skillful writers.

Because the situation in every home is different, we can't say when the best time is to pursue each of the following suggestions. In any case, please be aware that writing skill develops slowly. For some, it comes early; for others it comes late. Occasionally a child's skill may even seem to go backwards. Nonetheless, with your help and encouragement, the child will certainly progress.

The members of the National Council of Teachers of English welcome your involvement in your child's education in writing. We hope you will enjoy following these suggestions for helping your child become a better writer, both at home and at school.

THINGS TO DO AT HOME

1. Build a climate of words at home. Go places and see things with your child, then talk about what has been seen, heard, smelled, tasted, touched. The basis of good writing is good talk, and younger children especially grow into stronger control of language when loving adults-particularly parents--share experiences and rich talk about those experiences.

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2. Let children see you write often. You're both a model and a teacher. If children never see adults write, they gain an impression that writing occurs only at school. What you do is as important as what you say. Have children see you writing notes to friends, letters to business firms, perhaps stories to share with the children. From time to time, read aloud what you have written and ask the children their opinion of what you've said. If it's not perfect, so much the better. Making changes in what you write confirms for the child that revision is a natural part of writing, which it is.

3. Be as helpful as you can in helping children write. Talk through their ideas with them; help them discover what they want to say. When they ask for help with spelling, punctuation, and usage, supply that help. Your most effective role is not as a critic but as a helper. Rejoice in effort, delight in ideas, and resist the temptation to be critical.

4. Provide a suitable place for children to write. A quiet corner is best, the child's own place, if possible. If not, any flat surface with elbow room, a comfortable chair, and a good light will do.

5. Give, and encourage others to give the child gifts associated with writing.

--pens of several kinds
--pencils of appropriate size and hardness
--a desk lamp
--pads of paper, stationery and envelopes--even stamps
--a booklet for a diary or daily journal (Make sure that the booklet is the child's private property; when children want to share, they will.)
--a dictionary appropriate to the child's age and needs. Most dictionary use is for checking spelling, but a good dictionary contains fascinating

information on word origins, synonyms, pronunciation, and so fourth.
--a thesaurus for older children. This will help in the search for the "right" word
--a typewriter, even a battered portable will do, allowing for occasional public messages, like neighborhood newspapers, play scripts
--erasers or "white-out" liquid for correcting errors that the child wants to repair without rewriting.

6. Encourage (but do not demand) frequent writing. Be patient with reluctance to write. "I have nothing to say" is a perfect excuse. Recognize that the desire to write is a sometime thing. There will be times when a child "burns" to write, others when the need is cool. But frequency of writing is important to develop the habit of writing.

7. Praise the child's efforts at writing. Forget what happened to you in school, and resist the tendency to focus on errors of spelling, punctuation, and other mechanical parts of writing. Emphasize the child's successes. For every error the child makes, there are dozens of things he or she has done well.

8. Share letters from friends and relatives. Treat such letters as special events. Urge relatives and friends to write notes and letters to the child, no matter how brief. Writing is especially rewarding when the child gets a response. When thank you notes are in order, after a holiday especially, sit with the child and write your own notes at the same time. Writing ten letters (for ten gifts) is a heavy burden for the child; space the work and be supportive.

9. Encourage the child to write away for information, free samples, travel brochures. For a great many suggestions about where to write and how to write, purchase a copy of the helpful U.S. Postal Service booklet, All About Letters (available from NCTE @ $1.50 per copy).

10. Be alert to occasions when the child can be involved in writing. For example, helping with grocery lists; adding notes at the end of parents' letters; sending holiday and birthday cards; taking down telephone messages; writing notes to friends; helping plan trips by writing for information; drafting notes to school for parental signature; writing notes to letter carriers and other service persons; preparing invitations to family get-togethers.

Writing for real purposes is rewarding, and the daily activities of families present many opportunities for purposeful writing. Involving your child may take some coaxing, but it will be worth your patient effort.

THINGS TO DO FOR SCHOOL WRITING PROGRAMS

1. Ask to see the child's writing, either the writing brought home or the writing kept in folders at school. Encourage the use of writing folders, both at home and at school. Most writing should be kept, not thrown away. Folders are important means for helping both teachers and children see progress in writing skill.

2. Be affirmative about the child's efforts in school writing. Recognize that for every error a child makes, he or she will do many things right. Applaud the good things you see. The willingness to write is fragile. Your optimistic attitude toward the child's efforts is vital to stregthening the writing habit.

3. Be primarily interested in the content, not the mechanics of expression. It's easy for many adults to spot misspellings, faulty word usage, and shaky punctuation. Perfection in these escapes most adults, so don't demand it of children. Sometimes teachers--for these same reasons--will

mark only a few mechanical errors, leaving others for another time. What matters most in writing is words, sentences, and ideas. Perfection in mechanics develops slowly. Be patient.

4. Find out if children are given writing instruction and practice in writing on a regular basis. Daily writing is the ideal; once a week is not often enough. If classes are too large in your school, understand that it may not be possible for teachers to ask as much writing practice as they or you would like. Insist on smaller classes--no more than 25 in elementary schools and no more than four classes of 25 for secondary school English teachers.

5. Ask if <u>every</u> teacher is involved in helping youngsters write better. Worksheets, blank-filling exercises, multiple choice tests, and similar materials are sometimes used to <u>avoid</u> having children write. If children and youth are not being asked to write sentences and paragraphs about science, history, geography, and the other school subjects, they are not being helped to become better writers. <u>All</u> teachers have responsibility to help children improve their writing skills.

6. See if youngsters are being asked to write in a variety of forms (letters, essays, stories, etc.) for a variety of purposes (to inform, persuade, describe, etc.), and for a variety of audiences (other students, teachers, friends, strangers, relatives, business firms). Each form, purpose, and audience demands differences of style, tone, approach, and choice of words. A wide variety of writing experiences is critical to developing effective writing.

7. Check to see if there is continuing contact with the imaginative writing of skilled authors. While it's true we learn to write by writing, we also learn to write by reading. The works of talented authors should be studied not only for ideas but also for the writing skills involved. Good literature is an essential part of any effective writing program.

8. Watch out for "the grammar trap." Some people may try to persuade you that a full understanding of English grammar is needed before students can express themselves well. Some knowledge of grammar is useful, but too much time spent on study of grammar steals time from the study of writing. Time is much better spent in writing and conferring with the teacher or other students about each attempt to communicate in writing.

9. Encourage administrators to see that teachers of writing have plenty of supplies--writing paper, teaching materials, duplicating and copying machines, dictionaries, books about writing, and classroom libraries of good books.

10. Work through your PTA and your school board to make writing a high priority. Learn about writing and the ways youngsters learn to write. Encourage publication of good student writing in school newspapers, literary journals, local newspapers and magazines. See that the high school's best writers are entered into the NCTE Achievement Awards in Writing Program or the Scholastic Writing Awards or other writing contests. Let Everyone know that writing matters to you.

By becoming an active participant in your child's education as a writer, you will serve not only your child but other children and youth as well. You have an important role to play, and we encourage your involvement.